

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

April 14, 2021

8:01 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Harriet Drummond, Co-Chair  
Representative Andi Story, Co-Chair  
Representative Tiffany Zulkosky  
Representative Grier Hopkins  
Representative Mike Prax  
Representative Mike Cronk  
Representative Ronald Gillham

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION: School District Perspectives and Updates; Looking Ahead by Anchorage~ Lower Kuskokwim~ and Unalaska School Districts

- HEARD

HOUSE BILL NO. 25

"An Act relating to the duties of the state Board of Education and Early Development; relating to statewide standards for instruction in social-emotional learning; and providing for an effective date."

- MOVED FROM COMMITTEE

HOUSE BILL NO. 19

"An Act relating to instruction in a language other than English; and establishing limited language immersion teacher certificates."

- BILL HEARING CANCELED

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: HB 25

SHORT TITLE: PUBLIC SCHOOLS: SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL LEARNING

SPONSOR(s): REPRESENTATIVE(s) HOPKINS

02/18/21	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/8/21
02/18/21	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/18/21	(H)	EDC, STA
03/29/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106
03/29/21	(H)	Heard & Held
03/29/21	(H)	MINUTE(EDC)
04/12/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106
04/12/21	(H)	Heard & Held
04/12/21	(H)	MINUTE(EDC)
04/14/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106

#### **WITNESS REGISTER**

DEENA BISHOP, PhD, Superintendent  
Anchorage School District  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Took part in a presentation on School District Perspectives and Updates.

KIMBERLY HANKINS, Superintendent  
Lower Kuskokwim School District  
Bethel, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Took part in a presentation on School District Perspectives and Updates.

JOHN CONWELL, Superintendent  
Unalaska City School District  
Unalaska, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Took part in a presentation on School District Perspectives and Updates.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[8:01:14 AM](#)

**CO-CHAIR ANDI STORY** called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:01 a.m. Representatives Drummond, Hopkins, Prax, Gillham, Cronk, Zulkosky, and Story were present at the call to order.

**PRESENTATION: School District Perspectives and Updates; Looking Ahead by Anchorage, Lower Kuskokwim, and Unalaska School Districts**

[8:02:17 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that the first order of business would be a presentation entitled, "School District Perspectives and Updates; Looking Ahead by Anchorage, Lower Kuskokwim and Unalaska School Districts."

8:04:49 AM

DEENA BISHOP, PhD, Superintendent, Anchorage School District (ASD), took part in the presentation on School District Perspectives and Updates. In response to a prompt to describe a current school day for students in ASD, she said Anchorage had fully opened [in relation to the COVID-19 shut-down] on January 19, 2021, for elementary schools, and on March 15, 2021, for secondary schools. She said 85 percent of elementary parents chose for their children to return to face-to-face learning; the rest chose an online option. She said at the secondary level, [in person] attendance is about 70 percent. She said ASD is using the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendation of "cohorting" students, therefore the students aren't all going to recess at the same time. She said the school has been using other mitigation techniques within the school, and although it has been successful, it has also been "a lot of work" for the full staff of the schools.

DR. BISHOP discussed changes in enrollment. She said at the beginning of the school year, ASD saw a significant decrease of 4,000 students who either went to statewide correspondence, had moved out of state, or chose a local private school. She explained that private schools "started up right away," and shared that over 1,000 ASD students entered into private education.

8:07:27 AM

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked if the enrollment numbers had increased since the beginning of the school year when the district was down 4,000 students.

DR. BISHOP answered that each year there is some variation, and ASD wasn't sure if this year's change was due to students not choosing to come back, or students moving out because of military or Alaska's lack of economic growth. She suggested it was a change of children, rather than a change in enrollment. She said there has not been a major influx back.

8:09:12 AM

KIMBERLY HANKINS, Superintendent, Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD), took part in the presentation on School District Perspectives and Updates. She shared that LKSD was currently in a hybrid model for all of its schools, pre-kindergarten through sixth grade, with the exception of a few village schools with active COVID-19 cases. She explained that those schools are in remote learning status. She shared that LKSD has continued to work closely with the tribal councils in each community and the regional health care provider Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC) in monitoring cases and hopes to return to in person learning when the cases have been resolved.

MS. HANKINS said that for seventh through twelfth grade, LKSD has prioritized seniors and students who are most at risk, which looks different across LKSD's 29 schools. She explained that some villages have small student populations where all students have returned to school, which is different than from Bethel Regional High School (BRHS), which has a student enrollment of 475.

MS. HANKINS shared that the Yukon-Kuskokwim (Y-K) Delta region had the highest rates of COVID-19 per capita in the state for over four months, which she said was challenging. The district has had many students and staff test positive with COVID-19 this past school year, and lost two employees to COVID-19, she said. She explained that beginning last November all schools in LKSD and the five neighboring districts were remote only at the request of YKHC. She informed the committee that the region's cases have declined due to the efforts of YKHC's vaccine distribution.

MS. HANKINS said that on a typical school day students arrive and receive a health screening. She noted that a portion of the school population received BynaxNOW COVID-19 testing each day. She said LKSD has focused on targeted, in person instruction heavily in literacy and math, with a strong emphasis on credit retainment and credit recovery at the high school level. She said LKSD has strong mitigation measures in place including required masking by students and staff, a required social distance of six feet, the practice of hand-sanitizing, increased facility sanitization, and the aforementioned cohorts. She explained that cohorts stay together, including eating lunch in the classroom, which helps with contact tracing. She said roughly 90 percent of pre-kindergarten through sixth grade have returned from remote learning, and she hopes the district can return to full in person learning come August. She noted a

decrease in enrollment of 47 students which was as a result of families moving out of the district or region, or families opting to enroll in full-time homeschool.

8:14:33 AM

CO-CHAIR STORY expressed sympathy on the loss of the two employees. She asked Ms. Hankins about LKSD's hybrid model, and also asked what percentage of the student body was lost in the decreased enrollment.

MS. HANKINS replied that with the hybrid model, "Group A" comes to school on Mondays and Tuesdays and is in remote on Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. She said "Group B" is in person on Thursdays and Fridays, and is remote on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays. She said total enrollment is about 4,000 students, so 47 is not a great number given total student enrollment.

8:15:28 AM

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX, regarding Ms. Hankins' comment about the region being a "high risk" area, asked if the risk level of the Y-K Delta is measured by a local or statewide metric.

MS. HANKINS answered that LKSD works closely with YKHC, which has guidelines for the region's school districts that are in alignment with CDC guidance for operational zones. When asked if the criteria were published anywhere, she replied that it is published by YKHC and on LKSD website.

8:16:46 AM

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY asked Ms. Hankins to speak to the challenges for remote students caused by the inequity of access to reliable Internet.

MS. HANKINS answered that approximately 10 percent of students have access to home Internet service. She said it is cost-prohibitive in the region, as an average package runs \$200-\$300 a month. She offered that LKSD used the Coronavirus Aide, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act funds to build an intranet. This has allowed students to access a learning management system, access PowerSchool, and use Zoom. She pointed out that students do not have access to the Internet through the system. She emphasized that it was a large effort,

requiring a modem and device for every family, along with a router and antenna in villages.

8:19:37 AM

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY asked if student's lack of access to reliable Internet would have implications to student achievement.

MS. HANKINS agreed that it would. She said the district could be doing more with reliable in-home Internet.

8:20:22 AM

JOHN CONWELL, Superintendent, Unalaska City School District (UCSD), took part in the presentation on School District Perspectives and Updates. He said UCSD is a city school district with two schools, a pre-kindergarten through fourth grade school and a fifth through twelfth grade building with a total enrollment of 387 students as of October 2020. He informed the committee that UCSD has been back full-time in person since the end of spring break, March 22, 2021. The last time the district was full-time, in person was before December 1, 2020. The school year began in person for the first 70 days, he explained, but when the city risk level shifted to "high" the school moved to home-based learning. He said Unalaska, similar to LKSD, has Internet and connectivity issues. While the district was still able to operate in person, it deployed its "local remote student learning network." He explained this was developed with the local telecom provider, which installed modems in students' homes through landlines. While this didn't allow for videoconferencing, students all were equipped with Chromebooks that allowed access to the district's online learning platforms, he shared. He said UCSD also installed audio conference technology in each classroom, so groups of students could call in to access their teacher together.

MR. CONWELL said the schools did home-based learning up through February 1, 2021, when they were able to shift into a hybrid model. He explained this was voluntary and four days a week in the afternoon. He said students were strictly cohorted, and social distancing was increased from 6 feet to 10 feet. He said it allowed students who were struggling with the homebased model to meet face-to-face with teachers.

8:24:46 AM

MR. CONWELL said the current school day "looks about as typical as we can get with all the mitigation protocols, the masking, the physical distancing, the hand hygiene." He said students were still cohorting for meals, still utilizing plastic barriers, and every classroom had high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) air filtration systems installed. He said there was recently a potential widespread exposure caused by some COVID-19 positive fishermen who knowingly broke quarantine, which has returned the city to "high" risk. He said the school has remained in person, because the criteria had been adjusted based on the prevalence of vaccinations in the community.

MR. CONWELL said students' moral has improved as they have been back in school with friends and teachers. He said the district is offering after school programs but noted that there have not been athletics this year because of travel issues and quarantine requirements [with COVID-19]. He shared that the district is hoping to participate in Native Youth Olympics virtually state-wide and is also hoping to have the Missoula Children's Theatre produce a play.

[8:27:38 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked if UCSD was working with a local organization to develop its risk level criteria, or if the district was adopting something published by the state or the federal government.

MR. CONWELL answered that UCSD worked closely with Unalaska's local emergency operations command, which comprised the city manager, the Iliuliuk Family & Health Service (IFHS) director, and the mayor, along with the unified incident command, which is a group of stakeholders representing the fishing industry and city department heads. He said UCSD doesn't make decisions without consulting the medical team and has closely followed the city's emergency operation plan. He said UCSD brought a proposal based on CDC recommendations to the incident command and found a way to operate schools even with up to five community cases.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked if the criteria were available online.

MR. CONWELL answered that it had just been established, and he intended to put it on the school's website and Facebook page. He explained that most communication had been done via email with parents.

8:31:06 AM

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY informed the committee that the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) had provided "smart start guidance" for all schools across the state. She said this was so schools could develop culturally and socially relevant plans for convening education safely throughout the pandemic. The guidance, she explained, encouraged them to work with local health organizations and communities to develop those standards.

8:31:45 AM

CO-CHAIR STORY asked Dr. Bishop about inequities to home Internet services for ASD's students.

DR. BISHOP answered that Anchorage had access issues, but not for infrastructure reasons like in rural Alaska. She said ASD provided Chromebooks to students and worked with American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) to provide limited Wi-Fi to about 1,500 families who needed assistance. She said, "[The Internet data] should have lasted two weeks; [but it] lasted about a day because everyone in the family who had not had access joined in on the wi-fi, watched movies ...". She said many of the families had Internet in the past, but because of unpaid [Internet] bills, many could no longer sign up. The school board, she explained, put over \$1.5 million of CARES Act funds into accessibility for Internet and provided families with routers.

8:34:42 AM

CO-CHAIR STORY moved discussion to the next topic: student needs at the end of the pandemic school year.

MS. HANKINS said LKSD was seeing needs in several areas. Academically, she said the district was working to assess and address learning loss. She said the district wanted to provide specific, targeted instruction in literacy and math, support for credit attainment and recovery at the high school level, and support for pre-kindergarten programs. Socially, she continued, LKSD needed to make sure it was providing as much mental health support as it could. She said the district was concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on students' mental health and had been throughout the pandemic. The district has itinerant social workers and councilors, she explained, but their travel has been limited because of the pandemic, so most of their work has been done by Zoom or over the phone. She noted that travel



restrictions in the region have eased recently, so students have been able to meet with support face-to-face. Culturally, she said one of the positives [the pandemic] has provided families is more time to be together and to practice subsistence activities. She shared that moving forward, the district wanted to provide more opportunities to incorporate culture into the classroom. She offered that as students returned, LKSD wanted to support them being in school in any way it could.

8:38:11 AM

CO-CHAIR STORY asked Mr. Conwell what he saw as the greatest needs of his students at the close of the school year during the pandemic.

MR. CONWELL replied that his district's needs were similar to Ms. Hankins's district's. Academically, he offered that UCSD would be aggressively assessing potential learning loss. He observed that students who had remained engaged throughout the various learning delivery methods did well when the district resumed in person learning, but he shared that the district is concerned about the students who became disengaged and were not participating. He said during January and February the district identified students, particularly high school seniors, who were at risk of not graduating. He said of the about 25-person graduating class, the district was concerned about 5-6 of the students and made an effort to get those individuals on course and back in person, and they are now almost all caught up.

MR. CONWELL said students suffered from anxiety and depression when isolated at home. He said the behavioral and mental health supports are critical and informed the committee that UCSD has a partnership with the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association (APIA) which has behavioral health counselors who can help students, and there is also a school counselor. He said if there was one need going into next year, it would be to increase counseling staff. With 1 counselor to 400 students, there is too large a workload, he opined.

MR. CONWELL said the district plans to offer a summer school program. He explained that in a typical year, this would be targeted to students who are performing in the lowest quartile, but this year it is opened to all students, with doubled staffing. He said the district was looking to develop after-school tutoring programs for the coming year, in addition to the Saturday "learning lab" that is offered to students.

MR. CONWELL said unlike at LKSD, home-based students in Unalaska created a burden for parents who needed to be at work. He described the city as a "type A, workaholic type community where folk work long hours," so when there were childcare issues and parents had to stay home, it caused financial burdens to some families.

[8:42:37 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked Dr. Bishop what some of the greatest needs of ASD's students were.

DR. BISHOP commented that Anchorage was seeing the same challenges that her colleagues had just discussed. Rather than speaking about learning loss, her district is calling it "unfinished learning, because of the issues in engaging with students. She cited a lack of access to learning, high-quality pedagogy, or face-to-face instruction. She offered that this summer ASD would provide a robust summer school. Approximately 14,000 students would enter school and be provided bussing and lunches, in what she described as an extension of the school year. She said there would be both a June and July session at four weeks each.

DR. BISHOP said the district saw this coming from day one. She said middle school students who struggled received incompletes, rather than failing grades. She said elementary students were behind on their reading skills. She shared that when early learning is impacted, there is a "trickle up" into each grade as a child moves through the system. She said the district was creating choice programs for all students in response to the issue, and that her highest concern was reading access.

[8:45:49 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS referenced a section of the spending guidelines from the American Rescue Plant Act that addressed homeless youth. He asked Dr. Bishop if she had seen an increase in students having homeless needs.

DR. BISHOP replied that there had been an increase. She commented that ASD works closely with Covenant House and other programs to support students "in transition," and has put operational dollars towards the support of families and students in transition. She said the issue was more about access to food, Internet, and other things associated with school. She stated that having families out of work and without food or

other necessities accessible is the biggest area ASD is trying to serve students.

[8:47:24 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS asked if there were new programs being put in place this summer and in the upcoming school year to assist with families in need, or if ASD would be bolstering current programs.

DR. BISHOP replied that ASD works closely with United Way of Anchorage to support some of the activities. She commented that the Anchorage Assembly, through Volunteers of America and other entities, has collaborated with ASD to support high school students, especially those who are living by themselves. She said it was a collaborative approach with the city through United Way of Anchorage helpline. She shared that ASD also provided a helpline for issues such as an electrical bill, food, and transportation. She said over 10 agencies are collaborating on this work. The biggest issue was food, and ASD had provided over 1,500 daily meals outside of student lunches for families.

[8:49:25 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND said that last May, money was provided by the state for child nutrition. She asked if this is what was being applied to nutrition services.

DR. BISHOP answered that ASD and its partners did use this money, but there are different rules for different monies. She said the school lunch program is based directly on providing school lunches, so it is a little different. She said the Anchorage Assembly awarded an additional \$400 per child to families.

[8:50:42 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked Mr. Conwell for an update on his district's financial standing.

MR. CONWELL replied that UCSD is a city school district, so about half of the school funding comes from the City of Unalaska. He said for the 27 years he had been in Unalaska, the city had funded the schools to the allowable cap, or close to it. He shared that the city has a strong local economy, though it is a little more tenuous now. He commented that there is some concern that if businesses and fish plants don't get up off

the ground after the pandemic, it will affect the city's tax base. He said the city received a small amount through the CARES Act, but not a lot. The money received from the federal government was used to purchase Chromebooks, install plastic barriers, supplement meals, and install the previously mentioned HEPA air filtration systems. In addition to the CARES Act, the State of Alaska gave about \$200,000 to the school district, which was utilized to implement the remote learning computer network and audio conference lines.

MR. CONWELL said the UCSD is concerned in the drop in enrollment. He said the school district depends on a small influx of immigrant students each year from the Philippines and Mexico, which has been more difficult because of tightening immigration restrictions. He said the school was down to 366 students from the October count of 387, and he believed it would take 3 to 4 years before the district would be back up to its previous fiscal year 2020 (FY 20) numbers of 410 to 415. He said in a typical year a drop like this would lead to cutting faculty. He added that classroom instruction was best done in person, not through a computer screen.

[8:55:54 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked how the district was planning to use the money from the American Recovery Plan Act.

MR. CONWELL answered that his recommendation would be for the district to target the funds for learning recovery efforts next year. He suggested this could be additional staffing for after school, tutorial programs or study hall, as well as additional materials to help with learning recovery.

[8:57:03 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked Dr. Bishop where ADS stood financially.

DR. BISHOP answered that prior to any money being received, each year ASD experiences an \$11 to \$14 million shortfall from the previous year in a pro forma based budget, which is about 2 percent of the district's operational budget. She said about 92 percent of Anchorage's funds are for support staff and are built into collective bargaining agreements (CBA's) which have a natural progression.

DR. BISHOP said that this year ASD utilized the CARES Act to support new infrastructure like personal protective equipment

(PPE) and the Chromebooks. She said it was also used to retain staff. She explained ASD experienced between an eight to nine percent decrease in enrollment, but the district was able to utilize "hold harmless" which assisted the district in growing smaller naturally. She explained that the district's enrollment numbers were due to DEED by November to help build the future state budget, which was difficult to predict during the pandemic. She said ASD foresaw about a 25 percent decrease, but believes students will return, however, there are economic issues at play. She shared that the district decreased staffing going into FY 22, because it believes there will be fewer students at first. She affirmed that the CARES Act money did support the district, and the additional Recovery Act money has yet to be spent.

[9:02:50 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS asked if there was a percentage estimate regarding how many students are expected to return.

DR. BISHOP replied that the district estimates out of 4,000 students that left, about 75 percent will return. She said many of them are in private schools, which are cost inhibitive for many parents long-term. She said many students may not come back because many families found that online programs met their needs.

[9:04:45 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND commented that social distancing was achieved by lowering class sizes and having fewer children in the rooms. She said this put a burden on the teachers who would have to teach the same subject twice to teach the multiple distanced factions of a class. She asked how this worked.

DR. BISHOP replied that ASD used three to six foot distancing, which was taken from CDC guidelines for masked individuals. She said ASD utilized additional classrooms and specialty teachers to create additional classes. She said the district utilized gyms, libraries, and rooms that are intended to be used for pre-school in future.

[9:07:21 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked how LKSD had faired financially during the pandemic

MS. HANKINS first replied to Co-Chair Drummond's previous question. She explained that LKSD saw the updated guidance for three feet of social distance and conferenced with YKHC, but because the region is still at the high-risk level, the school is continuing with six feet. She offered that this works because of the cohort model with students coming in person for two days a week. She stated that LKSD was hopeful that the case rates would lower the next fall and allow for three feet of social distance. She offered that LKSD had also utilized other spaces in schools for instructional space such as gyms and cafeterias.

MS. HANKINS said that in terms of finances, LKSD is able to work with what they have. She said flat funding results in the district having to cut costs every year in order to absorb increased costs in wages and benefits. She said the district works to find savings because of increases and other unanticipated costs. She said LKSD was able to absorb the loss of funds from the 47 students [who left the district or opted to attend homeschool] by looking at department cuts at the district office level. The district utilized CARES Act funding primarily for technology ("tech"), mostly to put the intranet system in place, she offered. It was also used to acquire PPE, to increase custodial hours, and for the routine costs of service fees such as maintenance through General Communications Incorporated (GCI).

9:10:41 AM

MS. HANKINS said that for Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER II) funds, the district has put money into summer school and extended day programs, which is happening at most sites where in person learning is happening. She said LKSD is utilizing funds to be certain it is able to offer credit recovery opportunities for students and a summer school program. She said one of the challenges LKSD faces every year in regard to offering summer school programs is staffing. Many certified staff leave over summer, so this summer, the district is planning to utilize the video conferencing system that is already in place. She mentioned the vocational training center (VTC) offerings and said there are six full-time, district-wide high school teaches who are housed in Bethel and broadcast classes districtwide.

MS. HANKINS said the ESSER II was also used to purchase air purifier systems for every classroom with HEPA filters. She offered that the previous spring, the district did an initial

assessment of all of its air circulation systems and addressed two schools that needed assistance, but the district wanted to take the extra step moving forward. She said LKSD anticipates providing further tech support for the intranet, continuing to provide PPE for its sites, and increased hours for staff. She mentioned that LKSD wanted to expand its bus fleet for improved social distancing. She said she anticipates utilizing these funds for several years.

9:14:09 AM

CO-CHAIR STORY asked Dr. Bishop if she anticipated significant systemic or instructional changes next year or the years hereafter.

DR. BISHOP responded that while online, at-home learning hasn't worked for many, ASD has learned about many benefits it provides, such as access for students and helping teachers with targeted learning. She commented that the district would be utilizing devices to allow students equity. Regarding cultural equity, she shared that it was a great learning experience for teachers, because online courses provided insight into student's lives. She shared that the majority of teachers in Anchorage are white, but the students are diverse, with many different languages and cultures. She said ASD plans to capture the understanding that the teachers now have in order to grow the staff's understanding of learning and families. She said ASD is now partnering more with families and providing more equitable access for them. She asserted there were many instructional platforms that were very beneficial which ASD will continue to utilize, but [online learning] also has provided opportunity for internal choice, and she offered that there can be online flexibility while still having face-to-face instruction.

9:16:50 AM

CO-CHAIR STORY asked Ms. Hankins what systemic or structural changes she anticipated for the next year.

MS. HANKINS answered that LKSD is looking to learn from the systems that had been in place during the pandemic and see if there had been any best practices or positive takeaways that could be put into place. She said LKSD will continue remote learning in some fashion and wants to be sure its intranet system continues. She also referred to the district's distance delivery program and said LKSD wants to strengthen its course offerings because it helps the district reach many students.



MS. HANKINS shared that rural Alaska has struggled with teacher recruitment and retention, particularly in the past year. She said because of this, the distance delivery system is essential in order to provide highly qualified teachers to instruct students, particularly in villages with unfilled positions. Ms. Hankins said the district will continue to assess unfinished learning and is looking at "beefing up" course offerings. She said one thing LKSD hopes to address is having adequate mental health support for students. She commented that some students already suffer from childhood trauma and now have pandemic-related trauma. She also mentioned [the need for] continued adequate professional development for teachers, so they may continue to provide the best learning opportunities for students. She commented that technology is key and said LKSD will continue to be innovative in how to approach meeting the needs of the students.

[9:20:01 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked Mr. Conwell if he anticipated significant systemic or structural changes next year or in the years ahead.

MR. CONWELL commented that he echoed what Dr. Bishop and Ms. Hankins said, particularly about parent partnership. He emphasized that the district in Unalaska learned just how important it is to form and cultivate those partnerships, particularly with parents who do not speak English as a first language. He shared that teachers have approached UCSD asking for opportunities to help parents better assist their children at home. He stated that parents felt they didn't have the skills or the education [to help their children with school], but he argued they could, if shown how.

MR. CONWELL said the district wanted to work on cocurricular programs that "fell by the wayside." He commented that educators were focused on the essentials this past year, and because of lockdown, it was difficult to operate after-school programs such as sports, music, or art. He opined that the district needed to start bringing those back in a meaningful way.

MR. CONWELL said this year was hampered by quarantine requirements. He explained that Unalaska is remote, and a medical emergency required an 800-mile medivac to Anchorage. He explained that students may need to leave [for a variety of medical reasons] and the district needs to keep the students'



continuity of education intact. Therefor, he explained that UCSD intends to keep its local/remote learning network in place and hopes to strengthen remote education for families who need to travel. He concluded by commenting that the district needed to "build back," and he reiterated, "So many things just fell by the wayside."

[9:23:56 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY commented that not all schools seem to "start at the same starting line with respect to the types of resources and opportunities that are made available to our students." She asked all three superintendents about external systemic challenges to delivering education.

MR. CONWELL replied that for Unalaska, it was "the necessary evils" of having to do mitigation protocols, particularly quarantine. He explained that because the city took an aggressive stance [in combating COVID-19] it was a very low bar before the schools began shutting down, with one community-spread case. He explained that he agreed with the approach, because of Unalaska's remote location and distance from medical facilities, but it hampered the ability to conduct school in a meaningful way, especially in person. He said it was disruptive when navigating risk levels and dealing with quarantines. He commented that he believes "we will be living with this for a while longer," but UCSD can continue to evolve and improve its operations.

[9:27:34 AM](#)

MS. HANKINS replied that one of the challenges LKSD faces is access to Internet and being able to have equity in what students can access from home. She commented that one of the challenges this past year was the work with all of the tribes in the region. She explained that each tribe crafted its own mandates, in terms of requirements for quarantine and travel. She shared that there was an operation center that tried to stay current with what was happening in all 24 communities. She said even getting teachers in and out of villages took great effort, particularly in returning teachers to villages last summer. She said most staff had to quarantine for two weeks, which resulted in the district changing its professional development structure. She commented that this has resulted in great partnerships, which the district wants to continue during post-pandemic operations.

MS. HANKINS said often the community shuts down and goes into lockdown, and then school goes to remote. She explained that in rural Alaska, many families live in multi-generational homes, and that access to healthcare is limited. She commented that this year has strengthened partnerships within the region's six school districts through YKHC.

9:30:50 AM

DR. BISHOP cited access to healthcare as the largest systemic issue ASD faces outside of school. She shared that ASD set up the first mass-vaccination clinic in the state and did so internally to help teachers and those 65 and older. She commented that while those 65 and older have Medicare, the access issue is in knowing the systems to utilize it. She shared that ASD has given over 30,000 vaccines. She explained that when there is a case in a school, and a child has to go home, ASD will vaccinate the entire family in that home. She offered that recently 19 family members showed up who lived in a single home with a second grader. She mentioned the cultural capital needed to understand the manner in which the systems work and said this was the largest insight ASD has learned during the pandemic as a school system.

9:32:45 AM

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK relayed a personal experience with new teachers in rural areas and said, "It just didn't seem like they had a real reality of what they were actually getting into." He commented that there were people who were ready to turn around in Bethel and fly back to Anchorage to leave. He asked Ms. Hankins what the district's "selling point" was to new teachers.

MS. HANKINS said that LKSD strives to provide excellent professional development for teachers and has worked to implement a dual-language enrichment model program in 20 schools. She said the district wants an outcome of bilingualism and biliteracy, has done work with place-based curriculum, and wants learning to be meaningful and culturally relevant. She offered that this is discussed at length with new teachers. She said LKSD also provides opportunities for staff to participate in culture camps the summer prior to arriving in the district and provides additional professional development for new teachers that often involves learning about the culture. She asserted that teaching in rural Alaska is "what you make of it," and suggested that being involved in the local community is very meaningful and enriches the experience.

MS. HANKINS referenced a previous question and noted LKSD's partnership with YKHC. She said throughout the pandemic, the Alaska Superintendent Association (ASA) has been incredibly helpful.

[9:37:17 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY thanked all three superintendents for speaking before the committee.

[9:38:32 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GILLHAM asked for the speakers' contact information, which Co-Chair story offered to share with him.

**HB 25-PUBLIC SCHOOLS: SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL LEARNING**

[9:38:48 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY announced that the final order of business would be HB 25, "An Act relating to the duties of the state Board of Education and Early Development; relating to statewide standards for instruction in social-emotional learning; and providing for an effective date."

[9:39:20 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS, as prime sponsor of HB 25, noted the relevance of the previous panel discussion. He said each superintendent discussed the need to address students' social and emotional concerns and the impacts from that last twelve months. He offered that HB 25 would create guidelines to help districts implement new programs or expand what was already in place.

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS suggested that many of these plans are going to have to be implemented over the next two years using American Rescue Plan Act funds. He said [the proposed legislation would help educators] teach things like coping skills, resiliency, self-restraint, cooperation, how to overcome obstacles, how to set and achieve goals, how to identify and adjust one's own emotions, and how to understand others' reactions and emotions. He stated [these are skills] that industry wants and employers seek. He noted that the legislation does not create any mandates, but school districts want these standards in place.

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS said social and emotional skills are one third of Alaska's Education Challenge under which the Dunleavy Administration has been working. He noted that the committee had heard from DEED that this is the most requested topic regarding professional development for educators. He said this would include working with families, and supplement and support the home environment. He concluded, saying HB 25 is what districts want, what DEED was working towards, and what parents worried about during the school closures of COVID-19. He stated that the proposed legislation had a small fiscal note and would be partially paid for by the American Rescue Plan Act.

[9:44:10 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked for clarification on the fiscal note.

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS answered that the fiscal note includes \$6,000 for legal work to implement the regulations, a \$1,500 stipend to pay educators from around the state who would travel to develop standards, and \$30,000 to hire a consultant to guide the discussion.

[9:45:33 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 9:45 a.m. to 9:46: a.m.

[9:45:53 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND moved to report HB 25 out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying fiscal notes. .

[9:46:20 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX objected.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX said he agreed that the skills emphasized are important to learn; however, he said he was unsure about a number of things. He said the proposed legislation reminded him of "missionary work," and referenced Article VII, Section 1, of the Constitution of the State of Alaska, which includes the passage, "Schools and institutions so established shall be free from sectarian control. No money shall be paid from public funds for the direct benefit of any religious or other private educational institution." He acknowledged that this likely referenced licensed religious institutions but argued that this was functional, and the legislature would be imposing cultural

changes. He opined that the state should not establish standards, rather, [the standards] should develop organically and locally within families and communities.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX said in recent Alaska history a "new culture was being imposed on an existing culture." He said he was involved with this work in the 1980s, and he felt it was a mistake to implement rapid cultural change. He said he noticed that very resilient people were "becoming less resilient by focusing deliberately on these standards, instead of just letting these skills develop organically." He argued that when it started to be a deliberate effort, people became "sanitized," and work was "less enjoyable; we were more apprehensive and afraid of each other and not as able to respond to the little challenges."

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX argued that trying to change culture too rapidly from the top down is the wrong approach. He referenced testimony from a previous meeting and argued that the ideas in the proposed legislation are already being implemented without top-down direction. He said he felt Alaska would be better in the long run if this were to develop organically. He asserted that it would be a requirement, even if it were not mandated, and referenced the enactment of COVID-19 safety protocols.

[9:52:43 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY commented that she supports moving HB 25 from committee. She considered the proposed legislation to be both timely and age appropriate and said that it considers the diversity of environments outside of the classroom from which students originate. She disputed Representative Prax's claim that this was similar to missionary work and shared her experience as an Alaska Native woman whose family was impacted by colonization. She said, "I take umbridge with the fact that ... this is being classified as imposing any sort of cultural changes." She countered that HB 25 looked to develop a set of skills for students to utilize throughout their lives and felt it would be inaccurate to classify it as cultural integration from the top down.

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY said that the need in Alaska is great [for social/emotional learning (SEL) support] and commented that there is a big gap in behavioral health support at the state level. She stated her belief that by investing in resources that provide tools as part of prevention, the state will save money on the "back end" of treating Alaskans that are going to

be in most need of critical behavioral health crisis resources, or even correctional resources.

[9:56:03 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK stated he had received numerous emails against HB 25. He opined that "the number one thing we can do is get our kids back in school." He argued that kids need to be around other kids, without plexiglass, and back to normal. He said his experience as a rural educator taught him to listen to local needs but pointed out that HB 25 would be top-down guidance, which he opposes. He said that although he supported school districts locally, he opposed the proposed legislation, because he believed the state shouldn't be making these decisions. He summarized his argument that he is a firm believer in local control because different communities have different beliefs.

[9:58:24 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY commented that her understanding was that learning requires dealing with social and emotional needs, but many districts do not have guidelines in place for instruction. She shared that she saw the proposed legislation as a mechanism to provide that. She argued that with local control, districts would have a set of guidelines from best practices that the districts could choose how to use.

[9:59:20 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS reiterated that the proposed legislation was not a mandate, rather it would set standards that are meant to be flexible for school districts at the local level. He said it was districts at the lower level that requested the standards be put in place, in order to help with expanding curriculums and providing professional development.

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS said that he agreed that getting students back in school is one of the most important things that could be done. He commented that students spend most of their days in school settings, and that knowing how to interact is critical, especially after a year away. He argued that HB 25 would make those interactions better, healthier, and more productive. He stated this was not a top-down directive; it was guidelines for districts to use, which is a bottom-up approach that allows for local control.

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS nodded to a previous conversation with Representative Prax and acknowledged that it is difficult to teach older adults in the workforce new skills and to have a cultural shift in a workplace overnight. He argued that those skills must be taught earlier. He said helping school districts know how to guide educators and teach those skills to children is the best way to ensure it is not a "fast shift" and to ensure that students have the skills when they reach the workplace.

[10:03:09 AM](#)

A roll call vote was taken. Representatives Zulkosky, Hopkins, Drummond, and Story voted in favor of the motion to report HB 25 out of committee with individual recommendations and the attached fiscal notes. Representatives Prax, Cronk, and Gillham voted against it. Therefore, HB 25 was reported out of the House Education Standing Committee by a vote of 4-3.

[10:05:06 AM](#)

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:05 a.m.